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CLIFF NOTES

Big Nudes: Controversial Helmut Newton exhibition is a must-see for fashion faithful & photography lovers

BY CLIFFORD PUGH 7.3.11/6 am



In one of Helmut Newton's most revealing photos, "Self-Portrait with Wife and Models, Vogue Studio, Paris" (1981), Newton's wife, June, looks on as he photographs a nude model. Courtesy of Collection of the Estate of Helmut Newton/© Estate of Helmut Newton



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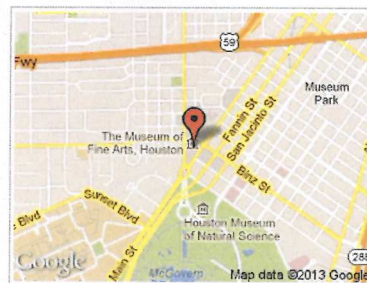


Helmut Newton had a way with women. You see it in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's marvelous, just-opened exhibition, *Helmut Newton: White Women • Sleepless Nights • Big Nudes*, which features more than 200 images from his three

groundbreaking books of the same names, published in the late '70s and early '80s. The models, often unclothed, are strong, bold and fierce. Erotic but not weak or vulnerable, they exude more than sex appeal; even with little or nothing on, they are in charge.

"In the '70s it was so shocking the way the women are standing there naked staring at the camera staring at you," said MFAH photography curator Anne Wilkes Tucker, who organized the show with Manfred Heiting. "There's not a demure bone in any of their bodies. They are looking directly into the camera with no reticence or discomfort."

Even today, the photos are controversial. After a major retrospective of Newton's work was showcased in Berlin in 2000 to great acclaim and huge crowds, no United States museum stepped up to mount a large-scale show, even though Newton, who



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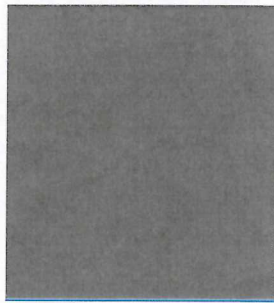
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unmistakable style of late 20th century photography. (The [International Center for Photography](#) in New York produced a small show in 2001.)

Recognizing Newton's importance, the late MFAH director Peter Marzio phoned Heiting, an Amsterdam-based collector who curated the Berlin show and is a close friend of Newton's widow, in 2007 and urged him to put together a show for Houston.

"Peter was always a populist who believed that a museum is a place for all people. He was aware of the enormous reaction to Newton and the Berlin retrospective, which drew 500,000," said Tucker. "He was also aware that this a man who changed aspects of photography, not just fashion photography."

I suspect that Marzio, who died in December, would have relished the lively debate about art vs. pornography and the role of a public institution in presenting thought-provoking material that the exhibit is likely to engender. In the room that pays tribute to *Big Nudes*, with life-size images of strong, muscular unclothed women in all their glory, Heiting points out that that European Old Masters paintings in another wing of the museum feature nearly as many exposed body parts and no one seems to mind.

"The only difference between this work and European paintings is the tool: the brush vs. the camera. Here, (Newton) only needed an hour with the model; the painter needed a week," Heiting said, with a bemused smile.

After Marzio's call, Heiting and June Newton discussed a full-scale retrospective but, at her advanced age (mid-80s), she said she didn't have the energy for that, so they settled on selections from three early books that showcased Helmut Newton's early work and propelled him to stardom. The photos in the exhibit are purposely kept unframed and not covered with glass in order to show how Newton's work appeared in magazines, Heiting said. "He always called himself a gun-for-hire. He was a commercial photographer who worked for the printed page."

Born Helmut Neustadter in 1920 to an affluent Jewish family, Newton (who changed his name when becoming an Australian citizen in 1945) was no doubt influenced by the decadent cabaret-atmosphere of Weimar Germany, with a little of *The Night Porter* thrown in, as his early photos from the book *White Women*, which fill the first two rooms of the exhibit, are set in scenes of luxury and decadence. One of the first photos on view, from the "Villa d'Este, Lake Como, Italy" series, features a color photograph of a woman reclining on a sofa of a lush drawing room, smoking a cigarette, her garters and stockings exposed.

Newton had purchased his first camera at the age of 12 and apprenticed with noted German fashion theatrical photographer Yva before his family fled Germany in 1938 after the [Kristallnacht](#) attacks against German Jews. At 18, he escaped to Singapore and was later interned by British authorities and shipped to Australia. After the war he opened a photography studio and met his wife, who played an integral part in his career. One of the final photographs in the exhibit attests to their devotion: He is photographing a nude model as June intently looks on.

Newton found his calling as a commercial photographer in Paris in the early 1960s where he established a working relationship with French Vogue and became famous for introducing erotic subjects into fashion photography. Newton wrote that French Vogue "let us photographers loose in the streets of Paris like wild dogs to bring back the most outrageous pictures that only French Vogue would ever have the courage to publish."

As Tucker recounts in a book that accompanies the exhibit, Newton's work revealed recurring themes. He often photographed a woman looking at herself in a mirror or directly into the camera and used mannequins to mix fantasy and reality. After seeing the movie *La Grande Illusion*, he photographed models in neck braces and orthopedic devices. He introduced bondage scenarios and women in suggestive situations with each other. Along with top fashion photographers Horst P. Horst, Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, he introduced narrative photos that told a story beyond simply showcasing new clothes.

He often piggybacked more traditional fashion shoots with more erotic material. The exhibit features a model in a Yves Saint Laurent tuxedo in one photo; in the next photo, a woman wearing only a hat and heels joins her. In the *Big Nudes* section, a traditional fashion shoot features four models looking in different directions. In one photo they are fully clothed; in the other photo they are in the same positions, only without clothing.

The *Big Nudes* room — the largest in the exhibit and anchored by larger-than-life photographs of several nudes on one wall — is a bit overwhelming (I've never been in a room with so many exposed breasts and vaginas), but Tucker believes Newton attracted widespread attention with this theme as art galleries took notice.

"*Big Nudes*, for me, is where he steps away from the fashion magazines and came into his own on what a Helmut Newton woman was," Tucker said. "Look at the way these women are boldly striding in these pictures ...They are Amazons."

With the exhibition, the MFAH owns the largest collections of Newton photographs of any museum in the United States. Officials have offered the exhibition to other museums but, thus far, in today's conservative climate, none has expressed



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So, for now, Houston audiences are the only ones with access to an exhibit I find dazzling and important, whether one is a student of fashion history or simply interested in photography. Newton's vision remains fresh and relevant. Last year comedian Tina Fey was photographed for Vogue magazine in a setting and pose similar to Newton's iconic 1975 photo of Elsa Peretti in a Playboy bunny outfit atop a New York skyscraper and, before a New York Times fashion shoot earlier this year, actress Salma Hayek was shown some of Newton's provocative photos to set the tone.

The exhibit also affirms Marzio's open and all-encompassing vision for the MFAH — I doubt many museum directors have his courage to exhibit the Newton show — and is another example of why he is so greatly missed.

Helmut Newton: White Women, Sleepless Nights, Big Nudes opens Sunday and runs through Sept. 25.

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